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Argentina's Failed General Strike of 1921: A Critical Moment in the Radicals' Relations with Unions

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In the years immediately after 1917, labor activism in Argentina expanded exponentially. This should not be surprising; almost everywhere in the Western world in the wake of World War I and the Bolshevik Revolution, strike rates increased greatly. The old barriers appeared to fall. The war itself brought changes to the European nations that at first seemed profound. The Russian Revolution sent a message to workers around the world that revolution was possible, and turmoil temporarily gripped much of Europe.[1]

That a distant upheaval should have a profound impact on Argentina is also not surprising. While Argentina remained neutral and was spared "total war," the conflict changed the nation. The torrent of immigration largely ceased, and even reversed between 1914 and 1918, producing a different labor market than that which had existed previously. Immigrants had lived for some time in Argentina and had adjusted to their new world, and no constant inflow of surplus labor existed. Only in 1920–21 did immigration significantly increase, and not until 1922 did it reach anything like prewar levels.[2] The initial war years brought severe economic depression, prompted by shifting demands for exports and difficulties in importing

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Unless otherwise noted, all periodicals were published in Buenos Aires.

1. Charles S. Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975). I would like to thank Alan Knight for bringing this book to my attention.

2. *Revista de Economía Argentina*, Jan. 1928, p. 36.

goods. Unemployment was very high, at least by Argentine standards. In addition, prices soared, particularly between 1917 and 1920.[3] Contributing as well was Argentine society's openness to the ideas and influences of Europe, which can be seen through an examination of either the labor or the establishment press.

The message from abroad was mixed: the Russian revolts of 1917 and the subsequent upheavals elsewhere excited and encouraged workers, while many from the middle and upper classes feared that Argentina would be next. Fear was perhaps as important as exaltation, and it led to the struggles that would characterize these critical years.

President Hipólito Yrigoyen entered his first term (1916–22) with the intention of increasing his popularity through a de facto alliance with elements of the labor movement. As this essay will show, the pursuit of that goal helped create a tempestuous era that threatened to unravel Argentine society. Yet despite the dangers to his political career, Yrigoyen maintained his supportive relationship with unions through what was up to that time the most conflictive and violent period in modern Argentine history. Most historians have argued that Yrigoyen ended this relationship in January 1919, after the *Semana Trágica* ("Tragic Week"), a violent and massive labor conflict in Buenos Aires. This essay argues, however, that only in mid-1921, when elections coincided with hard economic times and continuing bitter conflict, did Yrigoyen actually change course. This argument places labor at the center of his political strategy.

Background

The year 1921 can be seen as a critical breaking point in the relationship between the government and the unions. While it was not a critical juncture in the sense used by Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier in their recent book, it is a watershed. The nature of the relationship that developed between the state and the unions during the 1920s endured until the rise of Juan Perón, and some elements persisted after that.[4] In 1921 Yrigoyen abandoned his support for selected strikes, and the Radical governments of the next decade began to explore relationships with unions that did not frontally challenge the government.

The historiography of Argentine labor has mostly left blank the years

3. Ibid., June 1921, p. 484, Jan. 1930, p. 62; Guido Di Tella and Manuel Zymelman, *Las etapas del desarrollo económico argentino* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1967), 295–323.

4. Ruth Berins Collier and David Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena: Critical Junctures, the Labor Movement, and Regime Dynamics in Latin America* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1991); Joel Horowitz, *Argentine Unions, the State, and the Rise of Perón, 1930–1945* (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, 1990).

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between the *Semana Trágica* in January 1919 and the formation of the Confederación General del Trabajo in 1930. Usually this era is dismissed as one of stagnation and decline in which nothing of consequence happens. As some historians have begun to recognize, however, the period from 1919 through June 1921 saw intense labor unrest that not only engulfed the city of Buenos Aires but bubbled up in almost all regions, both urban and rural.[5] Despite the impression left by the most influential book on this period, David Rock's *Politics in Argentina, 1890–1930*, it is clear that the government did not abandon its policy of selective support for unions in the wake of the *Semana Trágica*, the extremely violent upheaval that rocked Buenos Aires in January 1919. The port, railroad, and telephone workers continued to benefit from government interest in settling clashes between capital and labor.[6] Yet in 1921, in the midst of a major burst of labor activity, the government withdrew support from the port workers, permitting employers to use nonunion labor in the port, and then broke a general strike. The balloon burst and strike activity almost ceased for a time. Why?

Enhancing the fear among many sectors of the population produced by the local labor unrest and the revolutionary upheavals in Europe was a simultaneous restructuring of the political system. After 1890 the country's first real political party, the Unión Cívica Radical (the Radical Party), challenged the Conservative oligarchy's control of politics. Led by Yrigoyen, a masterful politician, the Radical Party grew and threatened elite dominance. The Conservatives, facing both the prospect of overthrow and the increasing threat of labor unrest, decided to open up the political system. The passage of the 1912 Sáenz Peña Law limited voter fraud. The Conservatives still hoped to control politics. But in the first fair presidential election, in 1916, Yrigoyen and the Radical Party won a narrow victory. Yrigoyen had politically displaced much of the elite, creating concern in that sector. What did the Radicals and Yrigoyen stand for? While seeking power, their principal goal had been honest elections; in government they seemed interested mostly in power. Oriented to the middle class and willing to appeal to workers, many of their principal leaders came from the elite.[7]

5. Jeremy Adelman, "State and Labour in Argentina: The Portworkers of Buenos Aires, 1910–1921," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 25:1 (Feb. 1993), 73–102; Sandra McGee Deutsch, *Counterrevolution in Argentina, 1900–1932* (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1986).

6. David Rock, *Politics in Argentina, 1890–1930* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975); Adelman, "State and Labour"; Horowitz, *Argentine Unions*, 56–67; Paul Goodwin, *Los ferrocarriles británicos y la UCR, 1916–1930* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones La Bastilla, 1974), 194–204.

7. The best account of the formation of the Radicals remains Rock, *Politics in Argentina*. See also Ezequiel Gallo and Silvia Sigal, "La formación de los partidos políticos contemporá-

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Informal Alliances

Clearly in need of additional voters, Yrigoyen began a strategy that encouraged certain types of union activity. He aided strikes, or at least kept the police neutral when the workers were potential voters and the leaders were not perceived as opponents of the Radical Party. Yrigoyen supported strikers not because of his ideals but in hope of winning votes. While reluctant to establish a formal relationship with labor, Yrigoyen created a de facto alliance with a portion of the union movement, the syndicalists.

Before 1910, the labor movement had been dominated by anarchists who largely influenced the skilled, foreign-born workmen in the small shops that predominated in the nation's economy. The Socialists, with their legalistic and moderate attitudes, failed to mount a serious challenge. After 1910 a combination of governmental repression of the anarchists, a rise in militancy among port and railroad workers, the maturing of a new generation of Argentine-born workers, and a realization by those in authority that the "social problem" could not be solved just by violence helped lead to the rise of the syndicalists. While scorning politics and government regulations, the syndicalists displayed a pragmatic ability to work with the government. This attitude fit well with the political reality after voting fraud was limited. After 1912, for the first time, native-born workers' votes counted, and the votes of the syndicalists were not pledged to anyone. Government aid to the syndicalists encouraged the growth of a force that blocked the Socialists, who had become the second-largest political party in the city of Buenos Aires after the Radical Party.[8]

Yrigoyen preferred to keep the relationship ad hoc and informal. This policy dovetailed nicely with the desires of the syndicalists, since they maintained an outward ideology of scorn for bourgeois governments.[9] No significant attempt was made to codify labor relations into a legally defined system. The first successful effort came only in the 1940s with Perón. This was later than in many other countries in Latin America, even those with

neos," in *Argentina, sociedad de masas*, ed. Torcuato Di Tella et al. (Buenos Aires: Editorial Universitaria de Buenos Aires, 1965), 124–76.

8. See, e.g., Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, 67–124; Adelman, "State and Labour"; idem, "The Political Economy of Labour in Argentina, 1870–1930," in *Essays in Argentine Labour History, 1870–1930*, ed. Jeremy Adelman (London: Macmillan, 1992), 1–34; Sebastián Marotta, *El movimiento sindical argentino*, 3 vols. (vols. 1, 2, Buenos Aires: Ediciones "Lacio," 1960, 1961; vol. 3, Buenos Aires: Editorial Calomino, 1970). What is presented here is the traditional view. Roberto Korzeniewicz has argued persuasively that we need to rethink the strength of the anarchist movement. Korzeniewicz, "The Labour Movement and the State in Argentina, 1887–1907," *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 8:1 (1989), 22–45. For the purpose of this article, however, what is crucial is that by 1920 the syndicalists were the dominant force in most of the country and the anarchists were declining in influence.

9. Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, esp. 83–85, 125–29.

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much weaker labor movements.[10] The informal nature of the relationship between the state and the labor movement helped lead to turmoil because the only way for unions to receive the attention of the regime was to strike.

The most conspicuous strikes took place in the transport industry. The government focused attention on them partly because many of the workers involved were citizens and therefore potential voters, and partly because their industry had strategic value. For example, the government backed the Federación Obrera Marítima (FOM), the waterfront union that tried to represent all shipboard personnel. The FOM struck in November 1916 after employers refused both the union's demands for higher wages and better working conditions, and government mediation. Not only did the government refuse to defend strikebreakers, it used existing regulations to bar their employment. The government's actions forced the employers to accept mediation by the chief of police, and the strikers won most of their demands. This kind of cooperation continued despite constant strike activity both in the port of Buenos Aires and upstream along the Paraná and Uruguay rivers. A waterfront strike in January 1919 was submerged by the larger labor turmoil of the *Semana Trágica* and was settled only in March and April with a solution favoring the union. This was the so-called officialization, which gave the government the right to select shipboard personnel and which the government used to favor the FOM.[11]

The Yrigoyen regime was also intimately involved with the railroads. It tolerated violent strikes and intervened on the side of unions. However, until the 1920s it could make no de facto alliance like that with the FOM because the two main railroad unions themselves were divided, and because the continual stoppages interrupted traffic. There were 73 railroad strikes in 1919.[12] Centered on the railroads and ports, these strikes were particularly disruptive. As a result, the regime's strategy of de facto alliances with striking unions began to seem counterproductive. While in the short term the regime might acquire working-class support, the work stoppages provoked the enmity of other crucial sectors of the society. In addition, the political value of the working class was limited by the large number who were immigrants, lacked citizenship, and therefore could not

10. See Collier and Collier, *Shaping the Political Arena*.

11. Adelman, "State and Labour," 84–93; Geoffroy de Laforcade, "Ideas, Action, and Experience in the Labor Process: Argentine Seamen and Revolutionary Syndicalism, 1903–1927" (Paper presented to the Tenth Annual Latin American Labor History Conference, Duke Univ., Apr. 1993), 14–24; *Boletín del Departamento Nacional del Trabajo*, Mar. 1918, pp. v–72, Feb. 1919, pp. 7–123; *Boletín de la Unión del Marino*, Feb. 1–Apr. 12, 1919.

12. Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, 143–52; Goodwin, *Los ferrocarriles británicos*, 69–148; Heidi Goldberg, "Railroad Unionization in Argentina, 1912–1929: The Limitations of Working-Class Alliance" (Ph.D. diss., Yale Univ., 1979), 144–98; Departamento Nacional del Trabajo, *Crónica Mensual*, Jan. 1922, pp. 788–92.

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vote. In 1918, while only 38 percent of the voters of the city of Buenos Aires were from the working class, two out of three residents were.[13]

Yrigoyen came to power in 1916; as early as 1917, crucial sectors of the elite began to join together to contest the president's labor policies. In mid-1918, the Asociación Nacional del Trabajo was created by elements from rural, commercial, and industrial elites, both domestic and foreign. Its goal was to alter the government's labor policies.[14] It would play a crucial role in the events of 1921 by pressuring the government to end what it saw as chaos on the waterfront.

The *Semana Trágica* has long been seen as the defining moment of the Yrigoyen strategy of supporting strikes by syndicalists. In January 1919 a violent strike at a metallurgical plant escalated into a general strike. The ensuing violence and the threatened withdrawal of middle- and upper-class support led the government in turn to use violence against the workers and their organizations and to tolerate, or perhaps encourage, right-wing vigilante activity. This single week left hundreds dead, and left the government apparently on shaky ground for some time. Elements of the elite and the middle class, along with the military, did withdraw their support. David Rock argues that in the wake of this episode, the Radicals abandoned their past support for the syndicalists. Yet the regime remained willing to tolerate certain strikes and to help negotiate settlements that favored workers. For example, in March 1919, after a 20-day strike by telephone workers, Yrigoyen personally intervened, appointing the chief of police as a mediator. The workers won most of what they wanted.[15]

The years 1916–20 thus show a pattern of continuous and intense strike activity. That very intensity caused the strike wave to grow; the workers' faith in their cause led to their success. Railroad workers, militants of left-wing parties, anarchists, and syndicalists spread the word to new areas.[16] Strikes in Buenos Aires soared from 80 in 1916 to 138 the following year, 196 in 1918, 367 in 1919, and 206 in 1920.[17] The monthly number of

13. Richard J. Walter, *Politics and Urban Growth in Buenos Aires, 1910–1942* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1993), 61.

14. Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, 154–55; Jorge Schvarzer, *Empresarios del pasado: la Unión Industrial Argentina* (Buenos Aires: CISEA/Imago Mundi, 1991), 54–57; Deutsch, *Counterrevolution*, 64–65. For names of the Asociación Nacional del Trabajo's officers, see, e.g., *Review of the River Plate*, July 22, 1921, p. 215.

15. Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, esp. 201. For an examination of the *Semana Trágica*, see Edgardo Bilsky, *La Semana Trágica* (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1984). For the telephone workers, see Federación Obreros y Empleados Telefónicos, *Luchas y conquistas* (Buenos Aires: N.P., 1944), 8–18. The police chief, Elpidio González, was one of Yrigoyen's chief political operatives, and in 1922 he was elected vice president.

16. For an example, see Arturo Marcos Lozza, *Tiempo de huelgas* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Anteo, 1985), 192–98.

17. Departamento Nacional del Trabajo, División de Estadística, *Estadística de las huel-*

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dues payers to the syndicalist FORA IX, the largest labor confederation, exceeded 68,000 in 1920.[18]

As the strike wave continued, the political benefits of supporting labor diminished, especially as the presidential elections of 1922 approached. Another Radical victory seemed uncertain. It is impossible to know Yrigoyen's exact motives, but the political pressure became very intense.[19] He not only planned to choose a successor he could influence, but also intended to get reelected after the constitutional six-year lapse. Yet his political control had been threatened, as early as the *Semana Trágica*, by elements of the army and the elite. Yrigoyen managed to ride out the storm, but pressures continued to build, and in 1921 they came to a breaking point. Opposition from elites and foreign interests grew; worker unrest threatened to strangle the port of Buenos Aires and cut the vital link to the outside world. Yrigoyen temporarily abandoned his erstwhile union allies.

The Buildup to the General Strike

In 1921 Yrigoyen faced a series of challenges to his power, both related and unrelated to labor unrest. Within the Radical Party, strife had always simmered about the extent of Yrigoyen's control. He did not like to see any other party leader with independent power. A split occurred with the governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, José Camilo Crotto, because Crotto took independent stands. In any electoral contest the votes of the province were critical. When rumors emerged about the national government possibly taking over the province, which was legal under certain circumstances, Crotto gathered police and prison guards near the capital and increased his stock of arms and ammunition. After several months the crisis peaked in May 1921, just before Crotto resigned. At the same time, workers and shippers faced off in the port of Buenos Aires. According to a later report, "An individual visiting the president in May 1921 asked Yrigoyen if he was unduly worried about a serious port strike in Buenos Aires. The president allegedly responded: 'No! but [I am concerned] about that pig Crotto!'"[20] That Yrigoyen worried more about Crotto than the port is doubtful, but in all likelihood the coincidence of these two challenges

gas (Buenos Aires: n.p., 1940), 20. Unfortunately no statistics are available for other areas of the country. Strike activity may have been more intense away from the capital.

18. Rock, *Politics in Argentina*, 160.

19. Unfortunately, given the state of the Argentine archives, personal papers are almost impossible to obtain.

20. Richard J. Walter, *The Province of Buenos Aires and Argentine Politics, 1912–1943* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1985), 60, in part quoting U.S. Diplomatic Dispatch, Embassy Dispatch, Buenos Aires, no. 835.00/373, Aug. 31, 1921, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (NA), Record Group (RG) 59.

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made him uneasy. Also, the continuing labor strife made credible elite support for Crotto's resistance.[21]

Pressures also came from outside the political system. The Liga Patriótica, founded in the immediate aftermath of the *Semana Trágica*, was a militant, far-right organization that purported to defend patriotism but principally tried to destroy the union movement. Many of its leaders came from the national oligarchy. Scattered around the country, its brigades frequently conducted armed demonstrations and worked to break unions. Not surprisingly, this led to violence, since participants in both union and political activity commonly carried revolvers. While Manuel Carlés, the head of the Liga, had close ties to the Radicals, his group represented a serious threat to Yrigoyen's labor policies and to the society at large. Even legalistically minded unions felt threatened and prepared to defend themselves.[22] The Liga incited violence and appeared to be a potentially serious contender for political power.

An incident in the city of Gualeguaychú, Entre Ríos Province, exemplifies the Liga's violent tendencies. Since 1919 Gualeguaychú had become a center of labor activity. Tensions ran particularly high in Entre Ríos, an area of settlement by Jews, and thus a natural focus for the nationalistic Liga. In 1921, workers in Gualeguaychú planned their traditional May Day celebration for the central plaza. The Liga intended to demonstrate the same day to honor Justo José de Urquiza, a nineteenth-century national president from Entre Ríos. After consulting with provincial authorities, the worried local police chief made futile plans to keep the demonstrations separate. Armed Liga members entered the plaza, however, and became upset at the sight of the workers' red flags. The police chief persuaded the workers to take down the flags, but this did not calm the situation; an unknown gunman fired a shot, and a general shootout followed. At least 6 people died and 28 were wounded. The governor, the police chief, and the Radical Party newspaper *La Epoca* blamed the Liga for the violence.[23] The Liga exacerbated the violent tendencies of the society; both politics and labor strife frequently produced armed clashes.

This type of conflict took place in a political world that remained unsure of itself, in which the idea of competition and the acceptance of opposition parties were not yet firmly entrenched. In the politically crucial

21. See Walter, *Province of Buenos Aires*, 55–60; *Review of the River Plate*, May 13, 1921, p. 1187, May 20, 1921, pp. 1253–55.

22. See, e.g., *La Confraternidad*, Feb. 28, 1921. The best discussion of the Liga can be found in Deutsch, *Counterrevolution*.

23. *La Confraternidad*, Mar.–Apr. 1921; *La Epoca*, May 2, 3, 1921; *La Prensa*, Feb. 11, May 2, 3, 13, 1921; *Review of the River Plate*, May 6, 1921, p. 1119; Deutsch, *Counterrevolution*, 129–40.

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province of Córdoba, for example, the Conservatives remained in control. The Radicals of the province, arguing that the governing party did not permit fair elections, abstained from provincial and gubernatorial contests in the hope that the national government would take over that province. The situation helped lead to confrontations with labor.[24]

Added to these strains was labor turmoil itself. Numerous strikes marked the first half of 1921. In the city of Buenos Aires, the only district where consistent statistics exist, workers struck 70 times—fewer strikes than in the immediately preceding years, but larger ones, averaging more than 1,810 workers per stoppage. At no time in the strike wave of 1916–20 had the average exceeded 1,000.[25] During the same six months, workers outside the capital struck at least 103 times, and this is likely a gross underestimation.[26] In one three-day period in January, *La Prensa* noted 17 strikes and blamed the government for its lack of labor policies.[27]

A strike that shut several small plants would have had little impact beyond those immediately involved. However, many strikes became highly visible and could be perceived as threatening the country's economic lifeblood. As the acting U.S. chargé d'affaires wrote on May 28:

> The labor situation in Buenos Aires has been getting steadily worse with the result that conditions reached such an intolerable stage that they could no longer be endured. The commercial and industrial interests appear determined to put an end to them, as the matter really may be said to have resolved itself into a question as to whether the forces of law and order are to maintain supremacy or whether the Bolshevik element of the Labor Unions, composed mostly of professional agitators, are to be able to dominate the whole economic and industrial life of the country.[28]

General strikes rocked five cities besides the capital. While some failed miserably, the two strikes in Campana completely shut down this industrial city in northeastern Buenos Aires Province, a hotbed of labor militancy that had seen major strikes in oil refineries, paper plants, and the Las Palmas meatpacking facility. The anarchist-led movements evoked great

24. *Revista Argentina de Ciencias Políticas*, Mar. 12, 1921, pp. 431–33; Ministerio del Interior, *Memoria del Ministerio del Interior presentada al Honorable Congreso de la Nación, 1921–1922* (Buenos Aires: n.p., 1922), 90–117.

25. Departamento Nacional del Trabajo, *Crónica Mensual*, May 1922, pp. 861–64.

26. These figures were taken from *La Prensa*; undoubtedly, some were missed. A study of *La Organización Obrera* for this period indicates that *La Prensa* covered only a portion of the strikes. During the first three months of 1921 the Department of Labor of Buenos Aires Province counted 31 strikes in that province. *La Epoca*, Apr. 8, 1921.

27. *La Prensa*, Jan. 18, 1921.

28. U.S. Diplomatic Dispatch, Buenos Aires, no. 835.5045/193, May 28, 1921, pp. 1–2, NA, RG 59.

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solidarity. Boycotts made it difficult for the police to buy supplies. When general strikes were called to support those strikers, traffic ceased. The only cars on the road belonged to doctors, and they had to fly white flags. During the second general strike, not enough workers showed up to operate the generators, and the city was plunged into darkness.[29]

General strikes connected partly to partisan politics occurred in the country's second- and third-largest cities, Rosario and Córdoba. In Córdoba, labor unrest reached the intensity of 1919, especially on the Central Córdoba Railroad. The Conservative provincial government responded with police raids on meetings, closures of union halls, and arrests of union leaders. On February 23, the leader of the provincial labor federation sent a telegram to the minister of the interior in Buenos Aires asking for the takeover of the province. In March, faced with continuing police pressure and spreading strikes, the local labor federation declared a general strike with the public aim of securing the release of prisoners and the opening of union headquarters. Undoubtedly, it really hoped to obtain help from the national government. But several key unions refused to join the action or, like the printers, limited the time of their participation. The lack of support plus continued pressure from the police doomed the strike, though it spread beyond the city of Córdoba. After 48 hours it was called off. The Radical Party displayed sympathy but did not make the dramatic move of taking over the province. An editorial in the party mouthpiece, *La Epoca*, declared, "The attitude of the Córdoba workers (even if it is not justified) has an explanation."[30]

Rosario lived up to its reputation of being a center of anarchism in early 1921. Again, politics contributed to the unrest. Although the Radicals had governed the Province of Santa Fe since the opening up of the political system, the dominant party in Rosario was the Progressive Democratic Party, which controlled the city council. The governor, however, appointed the *intendente* (mayor). At the beginning of the year, the *intendente* went on leave, ostensibly for health reasons but apparently because he had quarreled with allies of the governor. The acting *intendente*, a

29. *Review of the River Plate*, Apr. 1, 1921, p. 809, May 13, 1921, pp. 1185–87, May 20, 1921, p. 1262; *La Prensa*, May 12–14, 1921. For general background, see *La Prensa*, Dec. 1920–May 1921, esp. Jan. 17, Feb. 13, Mar. 1 and 18, 1921. On general strikes in Tandil and Tucumán, see *La Prensa*, Mar. 17, Apr. 8–10, 1921; *Review of the River Plate*, Apr. 15, 1921, p. 937; U.S. Diplomatic Dispatch, Buenos Aires, no. 835.5045/193, May 28, 1921, pp. 2–3.

30. *La Epoca*, Mar. 3, 1921. The size and scope of the strike varied tremendously according to the source. See also ibid., Feb. 21–Mar. 7, 1921, esp. Feb. 25, Mar. 4–7; *La Organización Obrera*, Feb. 26, Mar. 5, 1921; *La Prensa*, Mar. 1–6, 1921; *Review of the River Plate*, Feb. 25–Mar. 11, 1921, May 26, 1922, p. 1281; *Revista Argentina de Ciencias Políticas*, Apr. 12–May 12, 1921, pp. 106–7. Also Ofelia Pianetto, "The Labour Movement and the Historical Conjuncture: Córdoba, 1917–1921," in *Argentine Labour History*, ed. Adelman, 153–54.

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Progressive Democrat named Fernando Schlesinger, believed strongly in cutting costs. His budget lowered some salaries and dismissed some temporary workers. The city was already several months behind in paying salaries.

On January 18 the municipal workers struck, but the stoppage was effective only among street sweepers and trash collectors. Rosario still had many horses, however, so the lack of street sweeping in midsummer presented a grave health hazard. The city administration organized strikebreakers, but the strikers limited their effectiveness by responding with violence. Schlesinger received no help from the governor in restoring peace, nor was a new *intendente* appointed. Support for the municipal workers slowly grew. Carters, carriage and taxi drivers, news vendors, and streetcar personnel walked out. So did slaughterhouse workers and bakers, causing shortages of meat and bread. Streetcars circulated only with armed guards and on restricted schedules. Finally, on February 4, the local anarchist organization called a general strike to aid the municipal workers. Police with carbines patrolled the streets, and many businesses closed after midday. The strike continued to spread, reaching the giant railroad shops around Rosario. Food grew scarce, in part because local farmers and milk vendors did not want to enter the city. The strike was resolved on February 12, but only after a new, more accommodating *intendente* was appointed. He quickly met with the municipal union, made concessions, and even offered to pay 50 percent of the wages lost in the strike.[31]

A series of highly visible strikes further undercut the image of the Radical regime. In Buenos Aires, striking actors interrupted the theater season. The Federación de Gentes de Teatro struck over whether impresarios could stage works by local authors who did not belong to the Sociedad Argentina de Autores. The strikers made extraordinary efforts to continue the stoppage, including paying the salaries of low-paid workers. Chorus girls used hat pins to defend themselves from mounted policemen. The actors had difficulty maintaining the strike, however, because they let plays by foreign authors continue, and because of the competitive nature of the industry. After several weeks the strike faded away, despite efforts by the chief of police of Buenos Aires to mediate.[32]

Even the use of automobiles was temporarily interrupted in the capital. In December 1920, workers at the West Indian Oil Company refinery

31. *La Prensa*, Jan 3–Feb. 14, 1921; *La Epoca*, Jan. 18–Feb. 14, 1921; *Review of the River Plate*, Jan. 21–Feb. 18, 1921.

32. Teodoro Klein, *Una historia de luchas: la Asociación Argentina de Actores* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Asociación Argentina de Actores, 1988), 16–21; *La Epoca*, May 12–24, 1921; *La Prensa*, May 13–June 2, 1921.

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in Campana struck, and workers at another refinery soon joined them. Within days, Buenos Aires had a shortage of gasoline. Taxi drivers began to charge passengers double. On December 31, the chauffeurs' union voted 957 to 907 to strike in solidarity. Despite the meager approval margin and threats from the Liga Patriótica, the strike was effective. No taxis were available, and few private cars even circulated. Gasoline sellers also joined the stoppage. The halting of car traffic in Buenos Aires caused both the *intendente* and the police chief to intervene and help settle the strike at Campana's West Indian refinery. Their involvement in a strike many kilometers from Buenos Aires was unusual, but it was the only way to untangle the situation. Despite a series of problems, cars were again on the street by January 13, 1921.[33]

More embarrassing to the regime was an elementary school teachers' strike in the wealthy province of Santa Fe, where the Radicals governed. The predominantly female teachers were not well paid; in addition, since 1918 the province had owed them 14 months' salary. *La Prensa*, which rarely saw a strike it liked, expressed sympathy for the teachers, who were demanding not only their back pay but a system of tenure and established working conditions. The latter remained the stumbling block, and after more than a month the strike collapsed; teachers who did not return to work lost their jobs.[34] This strike clearly displayed a level of incompetence among the governing Radicals, who failed to meet payrolls and alienated a group that should have been a prime party constituency. Many teachers had received their appointments as political rewards. Those who were women could not vote, but their male relatives could—and the party had turned its back on those it had previously rewarded.

A similar episode occurred in La Plata, the capital of Buenos Aires Province. Municipal employees struck against the Radical-controlled government because they had not been paid for two months, while higher-salaried officials had received their pay. After 11 days the strike ended with what appeared to be a workers' victory.[35] The strike broke out again, however, when the settlement was disputed. This time the strike failed, but it coincided with a trolley strike that completely shut down traffic, leaving the city dirty and without public transport.[36]

A wave of bombings connected to labor unrest, mostly in Buenos Aires but also in other cities, added to the fear of social upheaval. Usually the

33. *Review of the River Plate*, Dec. 10, 1920, pp. 1561–63; Dec. 17, 1920, pp. 1627–29; *La Prensa*, Jan. 1–14, 1921; *La Epoca*, Jan. 2–12, 1921.

34. *La Prensa*, Jan. 8, May 2–July 20, 1921; *La Epoca*, May 5–June 30, 1921.

35. *Review of the River Plate*, Dec. 31, 1920, pp. 1763–65; *La Prensa*, Dec. 24, 1920–Jan. 3, 1921; *La Epoca*, Jan. 3, 1921.

36. *La Prensa*, Jan 25, Feb. 8–Mar. 12, 1921.

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bombs went off without casualties, but they contributed to the air of uncertainty.[37]

By no means was the strife confined to urban areas, and the rural unrest menaced the government perhaps even more. Many of the threatened rural properties belonged to members of local elites or were controlled by British interests. Much of the nation's revenue depended on exports and imports; therefore rural production and transportation to and through the ports were vital. In addition, the government's political strategy depended on its ability to grant patronage jobs.[38]

The best-known example of rural labor upheaval is the strikes and boycotts that racked Patagonia from 1920 to 1922, which were immortalized by the film *La Patagonia rebelde* (1974). Many of the region's sheep estancias were British owned, while North American interests controlled the packing plants. British and U.S. diplomatic representatives applied pressure for strong action, adding their weight to local protests. Although the repression began earlier, it was after November 1921 that the slaughter of strikers started, leading to at least 1,500 deaths.[39]

In northern Santa Fe Province a British-owned company, La Forestal, controlled vast tracts of quebracho trees, from which tannin was made. Since 1919, labor unrest there had been almost continuous. In January 1921 the company possessed more tannin than it could sell. It began closing operations and driving workers off the estate. Pitched battles erupted between company police, backed by provincial police, and the workers. Workers throughout the province struck in sympathy. The company succeeded in driving out the workers and for a time closed all its operations before slowly reopening them with full control over hiring. The cost of its victory was high in human terms, though the actual number of deaths remains unclear.[40] Similar upheavals occurred in the British-based Las Palmas Company, whose land lay west of La Forestal.[41]

37. The editors of the *Review of the River Plate* seem to have been particularly nervous. See Mar. 11–May 6, 1921.

38. This is the type of argument that Charles Bergquist makes about the importance of export industries, though his emphasis in Argentina is different. Bergquist, *Labor in Latin America* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1986).

39. For an excellent overall discussion of the events in Patagonia, see Osvaldo Bayer, *Los vengadores de la Patagonia trágica*, 4 vols. (vols. 1–3, Buenos Aires: Galerna, 1972–74; vol. 4, Wuppertal: Peter Horner Verlag, 1978). For a good short synopsis, see Deutsch, *Counterrevolution*, 144–51. For an interesting view of the employers' side, see *Review of the River Plate*, Dec. 10, 1920, through December 1921.

40. Gastón Gori, *La Forestal: la tragedia del quebracho colorado* (Buenos Aires: Editoriales Platina/Stilcograf, 1965), esp. 123–48; *Review of the River Plate*, Dec. 3, 1920, p. 1495, Feb. 4, 1921, pp. 283–85, Feb. 11, 1921, p. 351, Mar. 4, 1921, pp. 541–45, Apr. 1, 1921, p. 809, Aug. 5, 1921, p. 370, Dec. 30, 1921, p. 1711; *La Epoca*, Jan. 30–Feb. 8, 1921; *La Prensa*, Feb. 3–15, 1921.

41. *Review of the River Plate*, May 13, 1921, p. 1185; Deutsch, *Counterrevolution*,

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Patagonia and the quebracho region were peripheral areas, far from Buenos Aires and economically of secondary importance. The strikes in the cereal zones of the pampas, however, much more directly threatened the elites and the government's strategies. Cereals were Argentina's largest export, and elites owned much of that land. The harvest seasons of 1919–20 and 1920–21 saw major labor unrest. The Liga Patriótica worked vigorously to break strikes, but it seems that police actions had more impact. Numerous armed clashes erupted between police and strikers, with fatalities on both sides.

The strikers tended to be the men who loaded bags of grain at the railroad stations and the carters who transported the grain from the farms. Many carters owned their equipment and were therefore small-scale capitalists. Harvest workers frequently joined the strikes as well. The pampas strikes became the kind of all-out combat that can exist only in small communities, involving the burning of fodder, boycotts of businesses, and lockouts. A wave of fear crossed the countryside. Proprietors and tenant farmers were badly outnumbered, and they frequently begged the police for protection. The *Review of the River Plate* reported rumors of rural worker uprisings and added, "Such a happening would surprise nobody considering the absolute lack of control that exists today all over the country."[42]

The Buenos Aires Waterfront

What finally made the government change its tacit support of strikes was the constant conflict on the Buenos Aires waterfront, where frequent stoppages threatened to cut off most communication with the upriver provinces, Patagonia, and above all, overseas trade. The ports, like the railroads, had been a favored stage for the Radical encouragement of labor since 1916. The ability to choke off foreign trade gave all port workers tremendous influence. If not used wisely, that influence could backfire, leaving the government to face irresistible pressure to change conditions. The Yrigoyen regime remained reluctant to alter its relationship with the

123–27; José García Pulido, *El Gran Chaco y su imperio Las Palmas*, 2d ed. (Resistencia, Argentina: Casa García, 1977).

42. *Review of the River Plate*, Feb. 4, 1921, p. 324. For general information see ibid., esp. Dec. 10, Dec. 31, 1920, Apr. 8, 1921; *La Prensa*, esp. Jan. 7, 13–17, 23, Feb. 9, 10, 18–20, 27, Mar. 13–19, 1921; Lozza, *Tiempo de huelgas*, 203; G. Cuadrado Hernández, "La rebelión de los braceros," *Todo es Historia*, Oct. 1982, pp. 78–96; *Revista Argentina de Ciencias Políticas*, Dec. 12, 1920–Jan. 12, 1921, pp. 243–44; Carl E. Solberg, *The Prairies and the Pampas* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1987), 167–70; Waldo Ansaldi, ed., *Conflictos obrero-rurales pampeanos (1900–1937)*, 3 vols. (Buenos Aires: Centro Editor de América Latina, 1993).

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FOM because of the perceived political benefits, but a series of crises made that change almost inevitable. The constant unrest on the waterfront alienated key forces, and, given its other problems already discussed, the government lacked the ability to resist the pressure.

How long could the Yrigoyen government appear to have lost control of the port? In April 1921 the FOM wielded enough power to force the captain of a river steamer to put off a passenger who, the union crew believed, had been sent by the Liga Patriótica.[43] An opposition congressman, Julio Costa, could refer to the Buenos Aires port "where there is a 'soviet' of which the vice president is the president of the republic and the president a Mr. García [secretary general of the FOM]."[44]

A key episode was the FOM's dispute with the Argentine Navigation Company. The London-based company controlled most river traffic upstream from Buenos Aires, a critical function given the poor land transportation in the northeast region. In February 1920, a dispute over solidarity with shipyard workers and the size of the crews of certain vessels peaked. The union began a series of boycotts, and the company locked out the workers. Hoping to restore service, the Argentine Congress passed a law permitting the government to run the ships; but the Yrigoyen administration made no move to do so. The minister of public works and the Buenos Aires police chief did engage in negotiations. Finally, in mid-March 1921, under the government's aegis, the company and the union reached an agreement that met almost all the union's demands.[45]

The government's pro-union stance became clear when a dispute broke out over the interpretation of the contract. In the shipyards, where strikebreakers had worked during the strike, would the strikers receive seniority for the time they were out, ensuring them more seniority than the strikebreakers? The government decided that they would, and also pledged that workers who had lost jobs would receive positions with the state.[46] The government not only favored the workers but failed to take decisive steps to restart river traffic, despite the undoubtedly high political costs in the upriver provinces.

Another crisis erupted in March 1921, the long-term result of a strike

43. *La Prensa*, Apr. 6, 1921.

44. Cámara de Diputados, *Diario de sesiones* 6 (1920), Feb. 23, 1921, p. 390.

45. See *La Prensa*, Feb. 3, 1920–Mar. 18, 1921, esp. Feb. 3, 7, 10–14, 1920, Jan. 1, Mar. 2, 8, 1921; *Review of the River Plate*, Feb. 1920–Mar. 1921, esp. Nov. 12, 1920, pp. 1319–20, Mar. 11, 1921, pp. 615–17, Mar. 18, 1921, p. 675; Cámara de Diputados, *Diario de sesiones* 6 (1920), Mar. 10, 1921, pp. 752–56; *The Standard*, Mar. 13, 1920, enclosure in U.S. Diplomatic Dispatch, Buenos Aires, no. 835.5045/179, Mar. 13, 1920; U.S. Diplomatic Dispatch, Buenos Aires, no. 835.5045/187, Mar. 3, 1921; U.S. Diplomatic Dispatch, Asunción, no. 835.5045/190, Apr. 11, 1921.

46. *Review of the River Plate*, Apr. 8, 1921, pp. 863–65, Apr. 15, 1921, p. 929.

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in early 1920 by warehouse and other workers in the central commodities market that achieved agreements only with some employers. The union began a boycott against the firms that had not signed. The longshoremen at the port backed the warehouse workers; all outgoing shipments of hides, wool, and similar articles needed a permit from the warehouse union before the longshoremen would load them. The union charged shippers seven pesos for every two thousand hides. In January 1921, fearing that companies had circumvented the system, the union began a boycott of the export of hides. The chief of police tried vainly to settle the problem. In March the meatpacking plant La Blanca, located in Avellaneda, just across the Riachuelo River from the city of Buenos Aires, declared that it no longer had room to store hides and would close, laying off its more than two thousand workers. Management added forcefully that it had no connection with the original strike and that it exported only hides resulting from its operations. At this point the government intervened more energetically. A meeting took place between the plant manager, the police chief, and a union delegation, and the workers lifted the boycott.[47]

The case of the *Martha Washington* also put pressure on the administration. The S.S. *Martha Washington* belonged to the U.S. Shipping Board, and therefore by extension to the U.S. government; it was operated by the Munson Line. A clash between a Chilean crew member and an officer escalated into an international incident when the crew sought help from the Argentine port unions, which declared a boycott of the ship. This left the *Martha Washington* tied up in port, and the Munson Line began turning its ships away from Buenos Aires. U.S. diplomats objected strenuously to what they perceived as union interference in matters pertaining to the U.S. government. Their protest carried weight, because trade with the United States had increased markedly during World War I. Rumors spread of a U.S. boycott of the port and of European shippers joining it. The local government finally stepped in, sending some crew members back to Chile at its own expense and paying various medical expenses. Again the national government had been put in an awkward position when it could ill afford a further loss of trade.[48]

Employers on the waterfront wanted to loosen the workers' grip, but

47. *Boletín del la Unión del Marino*, June 12, 1920; *Review of the River Plate*, Jan. 28, Feb. 4, 18, Mar. 11, 1921; *La Prensa*, Feb. 16, Mar. 10, 11, 1921; *La Epoca*, Mar. 11, 1921; Cámara de Diputados, *Diario de sesiones* 6 (1920), Mar. 10, 1921, pp. 755–56.

48. *New York Times*, Apr. 8–June 5, 1921; *La Epoca*, esp. Apr. 14, Apr. 21, May 11, 1921; *La Prensa*, esp. Apr. 13, 28, May 6, 11, 1921; *Review of the River Plate*, Apr. 15, 1921, pp. 942–43, May 13, 1921, p. 1187. For comments on work conditions on U.S. ships, see Bruce Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront: Seamen, Longshoremen, and Unionism in the 1930s* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1988), esp. 11–38.

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they needed a change in the government's attitude. This finally occurred because of a conflict set off by a jurisdictional dispute between unions, but it was the proverbial straw that broke the camel's back. The dispute arose shortly after the four longshoremen's unions fused into the Sociedad de Resistencia Obreros del Puerto de la Capital. The new union attempted to impose a similar unity on the two carters' unions that served the port. Multiple labor organizations were not unusual; unions had no official status and frequently splintered along ideological lines. In mid-April 1921, however, the longshoremen's union imposed a boycott on all carters who did not belong to the Sociedad de Resistencia de Conductores de Carros.[49]

The users of the port reacted vociferously, but also recognized that this was the moment they had been waiting for to seize control of the port. The elites' anti-union Asociación Nacional del Trabajo and the port users' employer organizations protested to the government and set a deadline of May 9, by which they would employ "free" (nonunion) labor to load and unload ships. That day the government sealed the port while the unionized workers met. The government then claimed that a strike had closed the port. A strike vote took place, but it was the government that had closed the port to all cargo traffic while looking for a solution that would favor organized workers. The FOM did not strike, and its members continued to operate the tugboats so that passenger traffic could continue. The employers' association brought in workers from the provinces, housing them at the exposition grounds of the oligarchical Sociedad Rural, where the annual rural exhibition was held.[50]

The government intended to take over the hiring of workers for the port—the so-called officialization—as it already had for shipboard personnel. It would then favor the new unions as it had the FOM. The government strongly desired to settle the conflict, especially after longshoremen in other ports began walking out in solidarity. But it faced two major stumbling blocks: the unresolvable conflict between the two carters' unions, and an ultimatum from the representatives of the shipping lines presented to the government on May 18. If the officialization plan went into effect, the shipping agents would ask their companies to boycott Argentina. A boycott

49. See esp. U.S. Diplomatic Dispatch, Buenos Aires, no. 835.5045/205, Jan. 31, 1922, enclosure no. 1, "Labor Unions in Argentina"; *Review of the River Plate*, May 13, 1921, pp. 1181–83, May 20, 1921, pp. 1251–53; Robert E. Shipley, "On the Outside Looking In: A Social History of the 'Porteño' Worker During the 'Golden Age' of Argentine Development, 1914–1930" (Ph.D. diss., Rutgers Univ., 1977), 298–99; Adelman, "State and Labour," 94–95.

50. This account comes from *La Epoca*, *La Prensa*, and *Review of the River Plate*. See esp. *La Epoca*, May 6–9, 1921; *La Prensa*, Apr. 23, May 4, 10, 1921; *Review of the River Plate*, May 6, 1921, p. 1121, May 13, 1921, pp. 1181–85.

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would isolate the country because Argentina lacked a merchant marine. The shipping companies were almost all foreign-owned enterprises.

While the government never outlined its reasoning, it clearly wanted to resolve the port crisis with terms favorable to the workers. The jurisdictional dispute made this difficult. Meanwhile, the potential boycott threatened the economic lifeblood of the country. Faced with this and the general tensions, the government embraced the employers' position.

On May 21 the government issued a vague announcement that in two days the port would reopen, but left unclear whether employers or unions would be favored. The port did open on May 23, but hardly any traffic moved despite the two-week shutdown. The shippers waited for the results of a meeting that day. When operations resumed the following day, the government did not permit the unions to control the situation. Violence erupted as the nonunion labor of the Asociación Nacional del Trabajo attempted to work the docks. Both sides exchanged gunfire. Each suffered one death and numerous wounded.[51]

The port closed again on May 25 and 26 for holidays, but by May 27 conditions had changed dramatically. The militant chauffeurs' union, which previously had demonstrated an inclination to strike, called a 24-hour stoppage for Independence Day, May 25, affecting both taxis and private cars. The strike declaration claimed that while the bourgeoisie cried "liberty, liberty"—words from the national anthem—liberty for workers was a farce. The Asociación Nacional del Trabajo previously had created a league of car owners, and strikebreakers were soon on the streets organized by some of the cream of society. On the morning of May 25, revolvers in hand, a group of men belonging to the Liga Patriótica forced their way into the chauffeurs' headquarters and made the workers kneel and salute the flag. That evening Liga members again attacked the headquarters, killing two workers and wounding several others. They also attempted to burn down the building. The police responded by arresting both attackers and attacked, but soon began to hunt down the strikers and sympathizers. Not surprisingly, the chauffeurs extended the strike. When the May 28 edition of *La Prensa* went to press, the police had picked up 250 people. More than 100 were chauffeurs; the rest were union leaders and leftists. The police also seized other union headquarters.[52]

The police repression continued to expand, and the two leading labor

51. See esp. *La Prensa*, May 14, 17, 22, 24, 25, 1921; *La Epoca*, May 19, 21, 23, 24, 1921; *Review of the River Plate*, May 20, 1921, pp. 1249–53; May 27, 1921, pp. 1317–19.

52. *Review of the River Plate*, Dec. 31, 1920–Jan 14, 1921, June 3, 1921, p. 1377; *La Prensa*, Mar. 23, May 18, 25–28, 1921; *La Epoca*, May 26, 27, 1921; *La Organización Obrera*, May 1, 1922, suplemento extraordinario no. 2, p. 36; Deutsch, *Counterrevolution*, 117–19.

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confederations joined with the chauffeurs' union to demand that prisoners be freed and union offices be reopened.[53] Many outside the labor movement, however, believed that the chauffeurs had insulted the nation. Injured patriotism combined with the showdown at the port plus the general turmoil to force the government to reevaluate, at least temporarily, its relationship with labor. Still, the government continued to receive union delegations but conceded nothing.

At the same time, the situation at the port worsened, from the unions' perspective. With security forces heavily guarding the port, unionized dockworkers continued to labor, except when they encountered nonunion workers; then they withdrew, leaving the field open to their competitors. The FOM, while continuing to boycott nonunion labor, made no move to shut the port. Only on May 29 did the dockworkers strike. On May 30 the FOM voted to go out on strike the following day. More important, the anarchist union confederation voted for a general strike. The police, however, raided the Communist Party's press, where the strike call was being printed, and seized the manifesto. That night, with police permission, the syndicalist federation met with representatives of anarchist and independent unions; but the police raided the meeting anyway and arrested 180 attendees. Only two members of the syndicalist hierarchy escaped to issue a general strike call.[54]

The response was as disjointed as the entire union strategy. The general strike came too late. To succeed, it should have begun no later than immediately after the attack on the chauffeurs. Despite a joint strike committee composed of both major confederations—which lasted, however, only four days—the strike was uneven. Syndicalists and anarchists wasted energy in a needless rivalry, and the former, until the last moment, seemed reluctant to break relations with the Radicals by calling a general strike. While many workers in greater Buenos Aires did walk out, crucial sectors did not cooperate. The trolley workers for the main company in Buenos Aires remained at their posts except for a half-day stoppage by shopworkers. The railroad unions went to the government seeking promises that union offices would be reopened and prisoners freed; reassurances satisfied them. Even the shipboard officers, who belonged to the FOM, refused to participate. In the interior of the country, union organizations called for walkouts but did so in a staggered fashion, in some cases after the strike was already essentially lost. The cooperation between the two

53. *La Organización Obrera*, May 1, 1922, suplemento extraordinario no. 2, p. 38; *La Prensa*, May 29, 1921; *New York Times*, May 29, 1921.

54. Marotta, *El movimiento sindical argentino*, 3:38–41; *La Organización Obrera*, May 1, 1922, suplemento extraordinario no. 2, pp. 38–43; *La Prensa*, May 27–31, 1921; *La Epoca*, May 31, 1921; Cámara de Diputados, *Diario de sesiones* 1, June 1, 1921, pp. 135–50.

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confederations collapsed. Unions began sending their members back to work, including the FOM and then finally the longshoremen. The unions had lost, and lost badly. On June 7, among the 1,863 unskilled men who worked on the docks, 1,631 were nonunion. The municipality began a vetting of the licenses of taxi drivers.[55] More than repression, the main reasons the strike failed seem to have been poor timing and key unions' reluctance to break with Yrigoyen. The economic difficulties that Argentina was experiencing undoubtedly made many workers more fearful.

Labor relations changed quickly after the general strike collapsed. In Buenos Aires during the second half of 1921, only 13,064 workers walked out in 16 strikes. In February 1922, the *Review of the River Plate* expressed contentment at the quietness of the labor scene. Slightly later, the U.S. consul gleefully reported the lack of disturbances in the port.[56]

Conclusions

Why this dramatic turnabout? The unions, especially the port unions, had depended on the benevolence of the government; but the constant turmoil and threats to cut off the economic lifeblood of the country became too much for the government to tolerate. Social upheaval threatened to lose the support of the middle sectors and to force the government to abandon its use of patronage. The elites also had become hostile. The government lacked sufficient interest in unions, and with elections approaching, Yrigoyen needed to make choices. However much the government had used force against some strikes, it remained extremely reluctant to break its alliance with the FOM and other port workers. It ultimately did so for two reasons: the threat from the shipowners and its own inability to solve the carters' jurisdictional conflict.

Things had changed drastically by mid-1921. The worldwide economic crisis of 1920 had struck. The export sector was in serious trouble. Unemployment had increased.[57] Government finances were disrupted. The

55. *La Epoca*, May 31–June 8, 1921; *La Prensa*, May 31–June 12, 1921; *New York Times*, June 3, 1921; *London Times*, June 3, 1921; *Review of the River Plate*, June 3, 1921, pp. 1377–85, June 10, 1921, pp. 1441–45; July 15, 1921, p. 178; *La Organización Obrera*, May 1, 1922, suplemento extraordinario no. 2, pp. 36–51; *La Confraternidad*, May 1921; *Times of Argentina*, June 6, 1921, enclosed in U.S. Diplomatic Dispatch, no. 835.5045/196, Buenos Aires, June 6, 1921; Departamento Nacional del Trabajo, *Crónica Mensual*, May 1922, p. 862; Marotta, *El movimiento sindical argentino*, 3:41–45; Rubens Iscaro, *Historia del movimiento sindical* (Buenos Aires: Editorial Fundamentos, 1973), 2:199–200; Adelman, "State and Labour," 98–99.

56. Departamento Nacional del Trabajo, *Crónica Mensual*, May 1922, p. 864; *Review of the River Plate*, Feb. 10, 1922, p. 337; U.S. Diplomatic Dispatch, Buenos Aires, no. 835.5045/207, Apr. 4, 1922.

57. Anglo-South American Bank, Ltd., *Cabled Reports from Branches*, Apr. 20, 1921,

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government could do little to stimulate demand for Argentine exports, but it could make sure that unrest in the port did not disrupt trade.

The events of May and June 1921 had an extreme impact on unions that at first glance seems out of proportion to actual events. However, most sectors of labor had become disillusioned with the Bolsheviks by this time, and the worldwide defeats of the Left had removed hope. The crushing of the port workers and the failure of the general strike compounded the loss of confidence. It is worth noting, and perhaps not coincidental, that strike activity in a number of countries—ranging from the United States, Australia, and Canada to Denmark and the United Kingdom—followed a very similar upward curve in the years after World War I and then descended, much as in Argentina. Charles S. Maier, in his *Recasting Bourgeois Europe*, has shown that with different types of corporatism, France, Germany, and Italy achieved stability after great upheavals during that period.[58] While it is not clear that corporatism had a direct connection with the developments in Argentina, the timing is amazingly parallel.

In 1921 the Radicals found the limits of the tolerable and began to restructure their relationship with labor. The collapse of the labor movement as a militant force was not unwelcome to the regime, but this does not necessarily mean that the regime abandoned its quest for allies. The Radical governments of Marcelo T. de Alvear (1922–28) and Yrigoyen's second administration (1928–30) attempted to build close but informal relationships with unions that would not precipitate constant disruption. Government support for the railroad unions permitted them to become the largest and strongest unions Argentina had yet seen. This was especially true of the Unión Ferroviaria, which claimed to represent all railroad workers except engineers and firemen. In the mid-1920s, with the active help of the government, this union was able to sign contracts with the private railroads to cover most workers. Membership increased accordingly, from an average of 18,925 monthly dues payers in 1923 to 70,793 in 1930. The Unión Ferroviaria's pattern of relations with the government was to be the model for other unions during the 1930s.[59]

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p. 5; *Review of the River Plate*, July 8, 1921, p. 61; *Revista de Economía Argentina*, Aug. 1921, pp. 154–55, and Apr.–May 1923, pp. 354–55; Shipley, "On the Outside Looking In," 348.

58. *Estadística de las huelgas*, 20; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Historical Statistics of the United States*, pt. 1 (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1970), 178; Arthur M. Ross and Paul Hartman, *Changing Patterns of Industrial Conflict* (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1960), 194; Maier, *Recasting Bourgeois Europe*.

59. Horowitz, *Argentine Unions*, esp. 59, 63–67; Goodwin, *Los ferrocarriles británicos*; Unión Ferroviaria, *Memoria y balance de la Comisión Directiva, 1922–1923* (Buenos Aires: n.p., 1924), 35; idem, *Memoria y balance de la Comisión Directiva, 1930* (Buenos Aires: n.p., 1931), 18.

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The Radical governments were even willing to work with the Socialist-dominated municipal workers' union of Buenos Aires. The city authorities received delegations from the union and frequently solved grievances. They also helped the union acquire land for a recreational facility; and when the union opened a library, the *intendente*, a presidential appointee, and other municipal officials spoke.[60]

Not all attempts at creating stable unions with which the government could work were successful. The Radical governments made a series of confused and ultimately unsuccessful attempts to create such a union on the waterfront. According to the Communist Party newspaper, *La Internacional*, however, it was partly this kind of activity that allowed two factions of the Radical Party both to defeat the Socialists in the November 1926 municipal elections in the Buenos Aires neighborhood of La Boca. Home to numerous sailors, La Boca had long been a Socialist stronghold.[61]

The government continued trying to build loose alliances with elements of the labor movement. While the violence and turmoil that had marked earlier periods remained unacceptable, the Radicals did not turn their backs on the unions. Their goals remained political: they viewed the unions as vehicles to attract voters for Radical candidates, as long as the unions did not constantly threaten to shatter the peace.

As Roberto Korzeniewicz has pointed out in his excellent article on labor unrest in the Province of Santa Fe in 1928, some politicians viewed the reelection of Yrigoyen as an opportunity to return to labor policies similar to those that had existed between 1916 and mid-1921. However, as Korzeniewicz makes clear, the Radicals were far from unanimous in these sentiments, nor was there clear support from Yrigoyen.[62] In addition, the Radicals had little time to apply these policies. Yrigoyen took office in October 1928; by mid-1929, the initial effects of what became the Great Depression were being felt.

The Radical regime abandoned its support for "disruptive" labor, but it did so in 1921, not in the wake of the *Semana Trágica* of January 1919. This distinction shows the importance of unions to the Radicals' political strategy. Even in the face of massive disapproval by the elites and constant turmoil, the Radical government clung to its policy. Even in the wake

60. For the settling of grievances, see almost any issue of *El Obrero Municipal* from the second half of the 1920s. For the recreational facility and the inauguration of the library, see *El Obrero Municipal*, June and Oct. 1927.

61. *La Internacional*, 1926–27, esp. Dec. 4, 1926; *La Bandera Proletaria*, 1926–27; Ministerio del Interior, *Crónica Informativa*, Aug. 1927, pp. 84–95; Walter, *Politics and Urban Growth*, 63–65.

62. Roberto P. Korzeniewicz, "The Labor Politics of Radicalism: The Santa Fe Crisis of 1928," *HAHR* 73:1 (Feb. 1993), 1–32.

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of the collapse of the general strike in 1921, the Radicals did not totally abandon labor. With government aid the railroad unions established themselves as a powerful force; under both Alvear and Yrigoyen, other unions received help.[63] For the Radicals, unions remained an important potential reservoir of votes.

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63. The author is currently engaged in a larger project examining the Radicals' relations with the unions. The approaches of Alvear and Yrigoyen were very different, but both were interested in the unions.